

SAINT MICHAEL

With Best wishes
for Christmas 18927
from J.C.E.F.

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ST. MICHAEL ARCHANGEL
XII REPRESENTATIONS FROM
THE FOURTH TO THE FIF-
TEENTH CENTURY WITH
AN INTRODUCTION AND
NOTES BY G. F. HILL
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INTRODUCTION

‘And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his angels,

‘And prevailed not; neither was their place found any more in heaven.

‘And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him.’

THESE verses from the twelfth chapter of the Book of the Revelation are the literary foundation on which almost all the modern artistic conceptions of St. Michael, from the time of the Renaissance, are based. He is essentially, to the popular mind, the bright angel, who pierces the dragon with his spear or smites it with his sword, as represented, for instance, by Raphael in his two pictures in the Louvre. But even during the Renaissance we find not a few, and during the Middle Ages very many, representations in which another of Michael's functions is emphasized; he bears the scales in which

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the souls of the dead are weighed, that at the Last Day justice may be meted out to them; he is thus, in the 'Dooms' which were painted on the walls of churches or carved over their doors, constantly to be seen as the central figure of the lower portion of the composition. The dragon-motive can be traced back in art some way farther still; but earlier than the eleventh century it is found only in a very few isolated works of art. Instead of the leader of the heavenly host, clad in shining mail, we have, in these earlier centuries, a pacific if stately figure, wearing a rich dress, which may be taken for a priest's or a court-official's, if indeed such a distinction is to be drawn at the time. There is no dragon; and the Archangel holds no sword or spear, but a sceptre, or perhaps a standard inscribed with the words 'Holy, Holy, Holy'; sometimes also the orb of sovereignty, surmounted by its cross. He seems, in fact, to stand in the company of the Almighty, as some great Byzantine court-official might have stood before the Emperor. This is probably not the only case in which the atmosphere of the Imperial Court seems to have affected the religious and artistic conceptions of Byzantium.

The verses of Revelation were of course never forgotten; but it would seem that the cult of Michael in early Christian times turned its

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eyes on other more pacific aspects of his character. In Asia Minor his worship flourished exceedingly at places which seem previously to have been sacred to pagan healing deities, and it is this character of Michael as a great Healer that is most prominent throughout the period when Christian cults were taking shape. At Chonae, near Colossae in Asia Minor, the most important of his shrines in the East, he was the patron saint of healing waters (see Plate 4). At the Michaelion near Constantinople he succeeded some pagan healing-god, in whose temple people slept, that they might see visions and be cured. At the most famous of his Italian shrines, on Monte Gargano, there was a healing spring. His worship in Rome, in the Castel Sant' Angelo, is connected with the impressivestory of the plague of the year 590. St. Gregory, to stay the plague, made a procession round the city on three successive days, and when on the third day the procession arrived at the Mausoleum of Hadrian he saw on its summit the Archangel alighting and sheathing his bloody sword, in token that the slaughter was ended. Michael, indeed, was constantly invoked in connexion with plague; and this was not merely because, as an angel of destruction, he was regarded as God's agent in such visitations, but also because he was a great healer. He who sends the calamity can also best

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protect men from it. One remembers that for the ancients Apollo was both one of the great healers, and also the god of plague. Indeed, there are a number of very curious analogies between the conceptions of Apollo and Michael. The legends of the foundation of the shrines of Monte Gargano and of Mont St. Michel both have some affinity with ancient myths of Apollo. And apart from such approximations, have we not, in the bright angel, who conquers the Old Serpent, a counterpart of the god of light who slays the Python? It is said that, as late as the eighties of the last century, the local sculptor, who was commissioned to replace a statue of St. Michael in a church in Southern Italy which had been destroyed by fire, took as his model the Python-slaying Apollo Belvedere.

So we return to the idea of Michael as dragon-queller. How was it that the artistic conception which had been in abeyance for so long, in spite of the authority of the passage in Revelation, became dominant in the eleventh century? German critics are ready with an answer. When the Lombards came into Italy they brought with them memories of Wotan, their dragon-slaying god. Christianized, this memory was enshrined in the conception of Michael. Thus arose the German Michael. Monte Gargano, the most important shrine of Michael in

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the West, was in Lombard territory. Here, in the eleventh century, we find represented on the bronze gates, and in a relief, the victory over the Devil. What can be clearer, then, than the inference that the new art-type was a German creation, one of those life-giving inspirations which Italy, sunk in the stupor of the Dark Age, owed to the current, as of fresh air, that came streaming over the Alps from Germany? Critics who have no propaganda to carry on will, however, remark that the bronze gates in question were made in Constantinople, and that the scheme of Michael overcoming the Devil (no serpent, by the way, but a figure in human shape) is absolutely Byzantine. Further, that when these gates and the relief in the same church were made, the Lombards were centuries past their prime, and to speak of a specifically Lombard art in Southern Italy in the eleventh century is to juggle with the evidence. No: although the Lombards may have made the cult of St. Michael dominant in those parts of Italy that they conquered, there is no evidence of their having created the art-type of Michael as the dragon-queller. That may have been due to some liturgical inspiration.

St. Michael as weigher of souls is not vouched for by the Bible. The idea is much older than Christianity, something like it, or capable of

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being developed into it, being found in Egyptian and in Greek art. Michael was the angel who conducted the souls of the dying on their last journey, and it was accordingly one of his functions to decide what direction that journey should take. The judgement by the scales represents that decision; and therefore he appears with this attribute in the Last Judgement as the instrument of the Doom of the Almighty.

PLATES

1. Byzantine Ivory. British Museum.
2. Mosaic. S. Apollinare in Classe, Ravenna.
3. English MS. British Museum.
4. Byzantine MS. British Museum.
5. Italian Sculpture. S. Giuseppe, Pistoia.
6. French Sculpture. Cathedral, Bourges.
7. Netherlandish MS. British Museum.
8. English Wall-painting. South Leigh, Oxfordshire.
9. Albert Dürer. Woodcut. British Museum.
10. Perugino. National Gallery.
11. School of Provence. Musée Calvet, Avignon.
12. Raphael. Louvre.

I. BYZANTINE IVORY. British Museum.

This is one leaf of a diptych (that is, a pair of writing tablets carved on the outside), which has been dated by some as early as the fourth century, by others as late as the sixth. The earlier date is probably nearer the mark. Whatever its date, there is a general agreement that it is one of the finest ivory carvings in existence. The inscription gives the first line of a couplet: 'Receive these presents and, having learned the cause' . . . The Archangel, a stately figure, in spite of certain obvious faults, as in the feet and neck, stands in a niche at the top of a flight of steps; he holds in his right hand the cross-bearing orb of sovereignty, and leans with his left on the sceptre which is his normal attribute in early art. The orb has suggested that the ivory may have been meant as a present to an Emperor; the magnificence of the piece is quite in keeping with such a destination. It is over 16 inches high. The country of origin was possibly Syria.



2. MOSAIC. Ravenna, Sant' Apollinare in
Classe fuori.

Michael and Gabriel are represented on the two pilasters of the triumphal arch; the ground is gold, and they wear white tunics and purple mantles, and hold standards, inscribed 'Holy, holy, holy.' Although the church was built in the first half of the sixth century, the mosaics were still being executed in the second half of the seventh, and it is probably to this latter period that this mosaic belongs.

ΑΓΓΕΛΟΣ
ΜΙΧΑΗΛ
ΑΓΓΕΛΟΣ

MICHAEL



3. ENGLISH MS. British Museum (Tiberius C. vii).

An illustration from a Psalter, from the Cotton Library, English work of the eleventh century. In its combination of spirited action with formal decoration it is characteristic of the school; observe, for instance, how the wings of the Archangel are arranged to fit two sides of the rectangle, and how the end of his cloak is caught up, apparently in the air, so as neatly to fill the space behind him. The dragon has a lion's head.



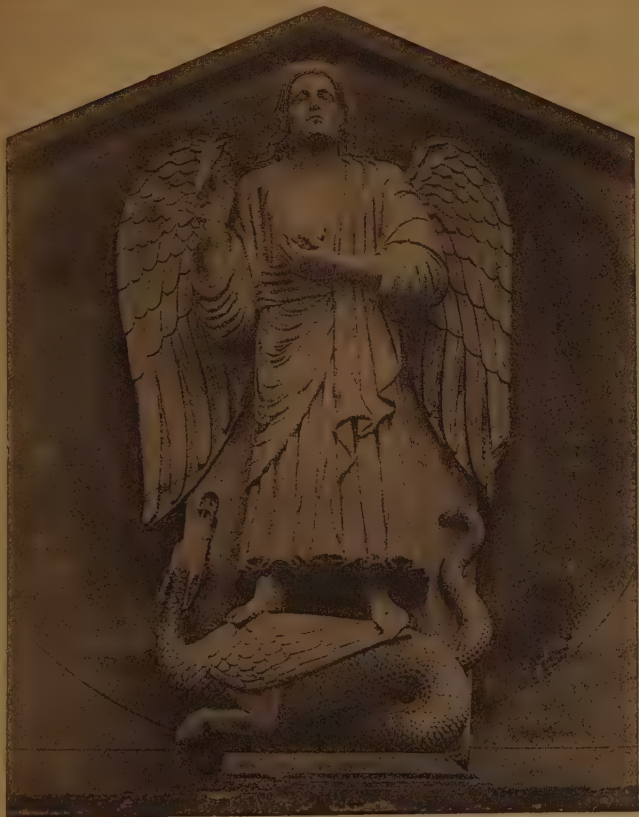
4. BYZANTINE MS. British Museum (Add.
II,870).

This miniature, of the eleventh or twelfth century, heads the chapter in a manuscript of Simeon Metaphrastes, which gives the narrative of the miracle which was wrought by the leader of the heavenly host, Michael, at Chonae. The holy hermit, Archippos, served the little wonder-working shrine of Michael at Chonae in Phrygia. The Pagans sought to destroy it by turning the river on to it; but Archippos prayed to the Archangel, who appeared in thunder and lightning, and with his sceptre caused the waters to disappear into a great chasm which he cleft in the earth.



5. ITALIAN SCULPTURE. Oratory of San Giuseppe, Pistoia.

This group has some affinity, and has indeed been actually attributed, to the sculptor Guido Bigarelli of Como, who was working in Tuscany in the second quarter of the thirteenth century. The figure has a certain stiff dignity, in spite of the heaviness of its build and the ungraceful outline of the wings.



6. FRENCH SCULPTURE. Bourges Cathedral.

The central figures of the middle row of the sculptures in the tympanum of the central door of Bourges Cathedral are reproduced from a photograph by Mr. Arthur Gardner. One of the pans of the balance which St. Michael holds contains a hideous figure with monstrous ears; in the other, according to Emile Male, is a lamp, the lamp of the Wise Virgins; but the object has also been described as a chalice, which would mean that salvation comes of the blood of Christ. The scale is weighed down in favour of the soul whose fate is being decided, and St. Michael caressingly draws the little figure away from the clutches of the devil.

The sculptures of the tympanum date from the end of the thirteenth century and show the smiling grace, not to say prettiness, which characterizes the work of the period.



7. NETHERLANDISH MS. British Museum
(Add. 38,121, from the Huth Bequest).

This miniature is one of the illustrations to a Latin manuscript of the Apocalypse. It is probably by a Dutch hand of about 1400. The background is of highly burnished gold. The dragon, according to Rev. xii, 3, should have seven heads and ten horns, and seven crowns upon his heads. Of his seven heads, one, uncrowned, is at the end of his tail, and is being dealt with by a small angel. The inscription gives the Latin version of Rev. xii, 7, 8.

Et factum est pluvium
magnum in celo
myshael et archa-
geli eius pluvium
cu dracone et draco
pugnabat et angeli ei
et non valuerunt neque
locus iucit est cor am-
plus in celo...



8. WALL-PAINTING in South Leigh Church, Oxfordshire.

This painting, which is reproduced from a photograph by Mr. Arthur Gardner, is on the south wall of the church, and in its original form dated from the fifteenth century. As we now see it, the Archangel, whose legs and arms are covered with feathers, appears as the weigher of souls in the Last Judgement. Demons, issuing from Hell's mouth, interfere with the right hand scale of the balance, in which sits a devil blowing a horn. On the left is the Virgin, holding a rosary. She stands upon a crescent, and is crowned, with the sun as nimbus, and stars about her head. For it will be remembered that in Rev. xii we read that 'there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars,' who was threatened by the dragon and delivered by Michael. In the same church is a Doom over the chancel arch. These paintings were discovered in 1872, and have been extensively restored. Thus it has been maintained that the stars are a mistaken restoration of a form of diaper; that the moon is doubtful; and that the figure of the soul kneeling on one knee and partially draped is against the conventions of the time.



9. ALBERT DÜRER. Woodcut. British Museum.

This is the eleventh of the series of fifteen woodcuts made by Dürer in illustration of the Revelation of St. John. The series was first published in 1498, and was probably inspired by the illustrations in Koberger's Bible, published at Nuremberg in 1483. Although the monsters are more curious than horrible, the tumultuous fury and confusion of the contest are well expressed, and the contrast with the quiet landscape below is most effective.



10. PERUGINO. National Gallery, 288.

This typically Peruginesque figure is one of the six divisions of the altar-piece painted for the Certosa near Pavia, of which three (this, the centre piece with the Virgin adoring the Child, and another panel with Raphael and Tobias) are in the National Gallery. The scales, with which Michael weighs the souls at the Last Judgement, hang on a tree at his side. The picture was commissioned by Lodovico il Moro of Milan in 1496 or earlier, but not completed until after May 1499.



II. SCHOOL OF PROVENCE. Musée Calvet, Avignon.

This panel, which is akin to two at Budapest, dated 1520 and representing S. Barbara and S. Catherine, has the Annunciation on the other side. It has been attributed to Nicolas Froment, but is more probably by a follower, about 1500, and shows the school of Avignon under Milanese influence. It has been noticed that the damasked background and the floor suggest a stage; these features, and the 'property' devil, indicate that the picture may have been inspired by some mystery-play.



12. RAPHAEL. Louvre, 1502.

The Great St. Michael in the Louvre (No. 1504) is better known than this little panel, but retains practically no trace of the master's handiwork. This, on the other hand, has apparently suffered little. It is a work of the painter's youth, and is supposed to have been painted for the Duke of Urbino about 1504. In addition to the dragon on which the Archangel tramples, there are various other amusing monsters. In the background are a building in flames and scenes inspired by Dante's 'Inferno': on the left, men weighed down by cloaks of lead; on the right, men tormented by serpents; the hypocrites of Canto 23, and the thieves of Canto 24.









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